Ontario

Think LITERACY Success

Grades 7–12

The Report of the Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario

2003

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Think LITERACY Success

The Report of the Expert Panel on Students at Risk in Ontario

October 2003

From the Chairs of the Expert Panels on Students at Risk and the Program Pathways for Students at Risk Work Group

October, 2003

Fellow Educator:

This handbook is one of the companion documents prepared by our committees for use in English- and French-language schools across the province of Ontario. It represents the Final Report on literacy of the Expert Panel on Students at Risk or the Final Report of the Program Pathways for Students at Risk Work Group. The information and resources it contains are intended to support the work of those in a leadership role for the Students at Risk Initiative.

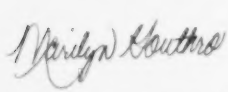
Our Expert Panels and Work Group have worked with the Ministry of Education to provide this material. We acknowledge with deep appreciation the Ministry's support in the preparation and publishing of these documents.

Throughout our committees' discussions, a key theme has been the vital importance of giving **all** students hope for the future. Students will be encouraged to have hope if they believe that they can succeed. For this to be true for all students, our education system needs to provide greater opportunities for improved literacy and numeracy and new program pathways to the world beyond the secondary school.

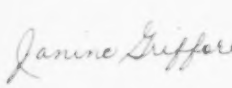
Providing improved educational opportunities, however, is only part of the picture. Attitudes also have to change. In particular, what constitutes students' success needs to be more broadly defined so that it applies to those students who choose to enter the work force immediately after leaving school. As a society we cannot afford to marginalize students simply because their goals may not be recognized as valid and fulfilling. Hence the need for what we have termed a "re-culturing" of schools so that positive and constructive attitudes prevail around options for students who may be considered at risk.

We wish you well as you continue this important work.

Yours in education,



Marilyn Gouthro, Chair
Expert Panel (English)



Janine Griffore, Chair
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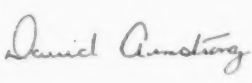

David Armstrong, Chair
Program Pathways Work Group

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Une publication équivalente est disponible en français sous le titre suivant : *La littératie en tête de la 7e à la 12e année : Rapport du Groupe d'experts sur les élèves à risque*.

This publication is available on the Ministry of Education's website, at http://www.edu.gov.on.ca.

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Literacy is about more than reading and writing – it is about how we communicate in society. It is about social practices and relationships, about knowledge, language and culture. Literacy…finds its place in our lives alongside other ways of communicating. Indeed, literacy itself takes many forms: on paper, on the computer screen, on TV, on posters and signs. Those who use literacy take it for granted – but those who cannot use it are excluded from much communication in today's world. Indeed, it is the excluded who can best appreciate the notion of "literacy as freedom."

(UNESCO statement for the United Nations Literacy Decade, 2003–2012)

About the Expert Panel

This report has been prepared by the English-language Expert Panel on Students at Risk. The panel was formed by the Ministry of Education to provide direction to Ontario school boards on English literacy and numeracy for students in Grades 7 to 12. Members include the following education leaders from across the province:

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Expert Panel Support:

Alison Mitchell, Education Officer, Ministry of Education; **Susan Pekilis,** Project Coordinator, Ministry of Education; **Dr. Ruth Swan,** Researcher, Ministry of Education; **Joanne Wise-Gillap,** Writer

Guiding principles for adolescent literacy

The following guiding principles offer a foundation for literacy planning. They summarize the key messages of this report.

1. Literacy is a key to lifelong learning.
2. All students have the right to acquire the literacy skills they need for lifelong learning, and it is the duty of schools to make this happen.
3. Literacy instruction must be embedded across the curriculum. All teachers of all subjects, from Kindergarten to Grade 12, are teachers of literacy.
4. Effective literacy instruction starts with the needs of the learner.
5. Quality literacy instruction for all students enhances the learning of students at risk.
6. All teachers must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to model and teach effective literacy skills in their subject area.
7. Families and communities must be encouraged and supported in taking action to promote student literacy.
8. Decisions about next steps in literacy for the individual, the school, and the board must be based on a wide range of timely, relevant, and accurate information.
9. Effective literacy learning may occur in or require a variety of innovative and flexible structures within the school and in the community.

Introduction

This report has been written for all educators in Ontario, because *all* educators have a role in ensuring that students graduate with the essential literacy skills for life. It calls on teachers, school administrators, families, community members, superintendents, and directors to work together to ensure student success. The report is a call-to-action and a framework for embedding high literacy standards and effective literacy practices across the curriculum, from Kindergarten to Grade 12. It reflects current research from Canada and abroad, supported by the extensive experience of educators across Ontario.

Although effective literacy planning covers the continuum from Kindergarten to Grade 12, the focus of this report is on adolescents in Grades 7 to 12. For information on early literacy, especially in Kindergarten to Grade 3, see *Early Reading Strategy: The Report of the Expert Panel on Early Reading in Ontario* (2003).

This report is not a technical guide for classroom instruction. It is, rather, a resource for developing and implementing a cross-curricular literacy plan in elementary and secondary schools and school boards. Information on instructional strategies can be found in the companion resource, *Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7–12* (2003).

Use this report to ensure that the literacy plan for your school or board:

- includes cross-curricular knowledge and skills for literacy, drawn from the Ontario curriculum and from the expectations assessed in the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test (OSSLT) and the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC)
- engages all teachers and equips them with successful strategies for literacy teaching and learning in their subject areas
- includes steps for identifying and tracking students who are at risk of not acquiring foundational literacy skills
- includes effective interventions and remediation for students at risk
- promotes collaboration between and among elementary and secondary schools and school boards, and actively involves families and community partners
- addresses immediate and longer-term needs, and is responsive to changes in those needs
- promotes high standards and accountability at the school level and board level.

Literacy for lifelong learning

The single most important purpose of education is to equip all students with the literacy and numeracy skills for lifelong learning. A century ago that meant teaching the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Today it means much more. Schools are called upon to prepare students with the knowledge and higher-order thinking skills they will need to solve increasingly complex problems and make decisions in a richly diverse, information-driven society. Literacy is the means to that end.

Literacy becomes the ability to understand, think, apply, and communicate effectively to achieve personal and career goals.

Literacy is defined in this report as the skills and knowledge in reading, writing, speaking, listening, representing, and viewing that empower learners to make meaningful connections between what they know and what they need to know. Literacy becomes the ability to understand, think, apply, and communicate effectively to achieve personal and career goals.

Students who acquire the foundational skills for literacy in their early school years are well launched for later learning and a rewarding future. However, early success in literacy is no "vaccination" against difficulties in the middle and senior school years, when the requirements for learning are vastly different and more complex. All students need ongoing instruction and support throughout adolescence to sustain their growth in literacy.

Recent provincial testing results have shown that too many students are not achieving the level of success in literacy that will allow them to participate fully in Ontario society. Students who have not acquired the foundational skills in the early years are particularly at risk. For them, time is of the essence and gap-closing strategies are critical. Educators know that with effective instruction and support, and appropriate motivation, students *can* close the literacy gap, earn their Ontario Secondary School Diploma, and move forward on a successful pathway to the future.

Who's at risk?

When this report speaks about students at risk, it is referring specifically to two interconnected risks: failure to acquire literacy skills for learning and, as a consequence, failure to graduate with an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. Effective literacy skills and a diploma do not guarantee success in later life, but it is almost certain that, without them, students will face huge barriers to employment, financial security, health, safety, wellness, and involvement in the world.

Indicators that a student may be at risk often begin to appear in the early school years, but teachers and parents – even the student – may not recognize the signs or be equipped to respond.

The term *students at risk* includes:[1]

- elementary students who are performing at level 1, or below grade expectations[2]
- secondary students who would have studied at the Modified or Basic level in the previous curriculum
- secondary students who are performing significantly below the provincial standard, earning marks in the 50s and low 60s and who do not have the foundations to be successful in the new curriculum
- students who are disengaged, with very poor attendance.

The barriers facing these students may include:

- lack of foundational knowledge and skills
- lack of motivation, interest, or direction
- personal, social, or family issues
- belief that school is not relevant to their interests or needs
- lack of appropriate instruction targeted to their learning needs
- lack of appropriate programs designed for their intended pathway or career choice
- a cultural or first-language background that is not prevalent in their school.

[1] This definition was adapted from the Final Report of the At-Risk Working Group, "A Successful Pathway for All Students," p. 5.

[2] Students performing at level 1 demonstrate limited knowledge and skills with respect to the curriculum expectations for their grade. Their achievement falls much below the provincial standard.

Closing the gap

The Expert Panel on Students at Risk uses the term *gap-closing strategies* to describe the full range of options that schools can use to help close the literacy gap for all students at risk in Grades 7 to 12. Some gap-closing strategies may involve remediation, but many happen right in the classroom as part of effective instruction in all subjects. Effective gap-closing is an integral part of learning, and a responsibility shared by the whole school. This report emphasizes the need to embed literacy instruction and supports throughout the curriculum for *all* students, and to provide gap-closing strategies for students who lack the literacy skills to learn at their grade level.

Some school boards use the term *remedial education* to describe their gap-closing strategies, and to draw a clear distinction between these strategies and the formalized and regulated programs and supports involved in *special education*. Here is one way to understand the traditional distinctions:

- *Special education* is intended for students who have been formally identified as exceptional because of their behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, or multiple needs. These students need regular and ongoing modifications to the Ontario curriculum and/or accommodations to the learning environment. In practice, some school boards provide special education to students without formal identification. In both instances, the school board develops an Individual Education Plan (IEP), reflecting these regular and ongoing modifications and/or accommodations.
- *Remedial education* has generally been considered to be a short-term intervention at the program level that raises the level of student achievement to an expected standard for the regular grade-level curriculum. Remediation is often used to improve the literacy and numeracy skills of students, with the expectation that these skills will help the students to progress in all subject areas and eventually achieve the regular grade-level subject or course expectations without regular and ongoing modification to the curriculum and/or accommodations to the learning environment. Tutoring and study-skills workshops are two examples of remedial education.

Lessons from research

Research can help educators to understand how adolescents learn, identify factors that increase the risks of failure in school, and determine supports that can help students achieve in today's climate of higher standards and graduation requirements.

According to research, students who lack literacy strategies and skills need the following:

1. Excellent teaching and strong positive relationships with teachers
2. Explicit literacy instruction in all subjects, using subject-specific content
3. Targeted instruction, which may include strategies for fluency and higher-level comprehension
4. Respect for and sensitivity to their individual differences and gender
5. Opportunities to consolidate and advance their learning by making connections to their world
6. Support to make the transition from elementary to secondary school
7. Activities that involve higher-level thinking, reasoning, and communication
8. Opportunities to reflect on thinking and learning, and to be more active and strategic learners
9. Teachers who understand the influence of cultural and technological shifts
10. Innovative and flexible school environments geared to student needs.

For a list of the sources cited in this section, see "Research sources" on page 62.

"My English teacher wants me to write about my feelings, my History teacher wants me to give my opinions, and my Science teachers wants me to write on my views about the environment! I don't know what my feelings, opinions and views are, and I can't write about them."

Rowe and Rowe (2002), p. 3.

1. Students who struggle with literacy need excellent teaching and strong positive relationships with teachers.

For all students, and especially those struggling with literacy, excellent teachers make the difference. These teachers know their students, are alert to the literacy demands of the curriculum, and have a repertoire of flexible practices. They:

- recognize and value the needs, interests, and capacities of their students
- are attentive to the social and emotional needs of students
- demonstrate consistent effort to keep students motivated and engaged
- provide creative and relevant instruction that students comprehend
- monitor student progress on an ongoing basis, and ensure that students monitor their own progress
- provide opportunities for daily reading.

Research indicates that ...

- Good teaching, with a major emphasis on literacy achievement and related verbal reasoning and written communication skills, is by far the most important factor in influencing student learning, attitudes, and behaviour. (Rowe and Rowe, 2002)
- Teachers help their students to develop a sense of competence and self-worth when they are able to convince their students that they care about them as individuals and want them to learn. (Dillon, 1989)

2. Students who struggle with literacy need explicit literacy instruction in all subjects, using subject-specific content.

An adolescent's confidence as a reader and writer affects his or her motivation to learn in any subject area. Achievement in the subject area improves when the student has appropriate background knowledge, strategies for reading a variety of texts and writing in a variety of forms, and instruction that considers individual developmental, cultural, and communication needs (such as support for English as a Second Language).

Research indicates that ...

- Students who struggle with reading have difficulty with texts that are expository, dense, and full of new, more difficult vocabulary – especially in math, science and social sciences – and need explicit teaching in how to read these texts. (Allen, 2000)
- Adolescents deserve instruction that builds both the skill and the desire to read increasingly complex materials in all subject areas. (Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik, 1999)
- Learning to read is an ongoing cognitive need for all adolescents. (Manuel, 2003)
- Teachers require knowledge of how best to implement effective strategies for students who struggle with reading. (IRA, 2000)

3. Students who struggle with literacy need targeted instruction, which may include strategies for fluency and higher-level comprehension.

Not all adolescent students at risk need help with basic literacy skills. They may, instead, need targeted support to develop higher-level literacy skills in order to make the transition from beginning reader to expert reader, and help to develop the advanced reasoning required for the intermediate and senior grades.

No single solution will work for all struggling adolescent learners. Individual students need instruction that targets their weaknesses and provides different levels of support for different periods of time. To help with the decoding and comprehension of complex and varied materials, students need to learn strategies for before, during, and after reading.

Research indicates that ...

- Weak reading comprehension, rather than an outright inability to read, is the main affliction of most struggling readers in middle and high schools. They need help acquiring and extending the complex comprehension processes that underlie skilled reading in the subject areas. (Allen, 2001; Cromley, 2000; Greenleaf et al., 2001)
- Adolescents who have elementary-level skills, but are not fluent readers with strong comprehension strategies, can benefit from the following instructional strategies: modelling of decoding and comprehension strategies; mini-lessons, cooperative learning involving team and partner discussions; self-selected reading; and learning materials that match student interests and needs. (Alfassi, 1998; Allen, 2001; Codding, 2001; Greenleaf et al., 2001; Moore, Bean, Birdyshaw, and Rycik, 1999; Pressley, 1998; Schoenbach et al., 1999; Showers, Scalon, and Schnaubelt, 1998; Taylor and Nesheim, 2001)

4. Students who struggle with literacy need to be treated with respect for and sensitivity to their individual differences and gender.

Adolescent learners are not all the same. They perform differently, experience the world in different ways, and have different attitudes. They respond positively to teachers who care about them, encourage them, treat them as individuals, acknowledge their cultural strengths, and are fair.

Adolescent boys are more likely than girls to perform poorly in literacy. Both boys and girls can benefit from teachers who recognize gender differences and take these into consideration when selecting texts, forming work groups, and choosing activities.

Research indicates that ...

- There is no simple, one-dimensional causal relationship between underachievement in reading, and factors such as gender, socio-economics, culture, ethnicity, or linguistic background. Student ethnicity, social class, and language do not automatically determine level of achievement. (Au, 1993)
- Gender differences in school require a multifaceted approach to teaching. (Rowe and Rowe, 2002)
- Successful instruction for adolescents is intellectually demanding, connected to the students' lives and the world, and socially supportive. It encourages risk-taking and celebrates and encourages difference. (Lingard et al., 2001; Luke et al., 2003; Newmann and Wehlage, 1996)
- System and school policies must support gender equity in a way that has a positive influence on the understanding and practices of staff. (Luke et al., 2003)

5. Students who struggle with literacy need opportunities to consolidate and advance their learning by making connections to their world.

Adolescent learners who struggle to read and write are more likely to succeed with learning activities that build knowledge and experience for a specific purpose (such as projects and presentations) and that enable them to demonstrate understanding. They respond positively to classroom practices that give them choices and access to a wide variety of materials and activities for reading and writing.

Research indicates that ...

- Students need the opportunity to select their own reading material at least as often as they read material selected by the teacher, and they need access to a wide variety of accessible materials. These are critical factors in ongoing reading achievement. (Bintz, 1993; Coles, 1995; Cope, 1997; Fischer, 1999; Ivey, 1999; Manuel and Robinson, 2002; Moore et al., 1999/2000)
- Lessons that make real-world connections to community problems and issues help to engage struggling learners and improve their literacy achievement. (Guthrie and Wigfield, 2000; Ivey, 2001)
- Effective literacy instruction provides students with opportunities to participate fully and actively, to use a variety of texts, and to draw links from one text form and medium to another (for example, book to film to music video). (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood, 1999; Beavis, 1998; Carrington, 2001; Sefton-Green, 1998; Stevens, 2001; Tapscott, 1998; Wade and Moje, 2000)

6. Students who struggle with literacy need support to make the transition from elementary to secondary school.

The transition from the junior to intermediate grades, and from elementary to secondary school, is a critical time for students at risk. The increasingly complex structure and expectations for students as they move through these grades requires them to become proficient readers and writers – and to have considerable background knowledge – as a starting point for success. Students who struggle with literacy need help to catch up to grade-level expectations and to develop the strategies and skills they will need for later learning.

Research indicates that ...

- Progress in literacy slows for some students as they move from elementary to secondary school. This may be attributed to adolescent development, combined with a change in curriculum and school culture. (Power and Cotterell, 1981)
- Many adolescents who do not identify with or belong to the prevailing culture of a school struggle to succeed. These students become labelled as "at-risk" or "reluctant" learners who quickly deduce that they have little chance of winning the game and therefore do not play the game. (Alvermann, 2001; Graves, Juel, and Graves, 1998; Hallahan and Kauffman, 2000; Stewart, Paradis, Ross, and Lewis, 1996)
- Efforts to improve secondary schools, and particularly to improve literacy rates and standards, must pay attention to the transition from elementary school, and must provide early interventions for academic recovery. (Roderick and Camburn, 1999)

7. Students who struggle with literacy need to engage in activities that involve higher-level thinking, reasoning, and communication.

Adolescents want to learn and succeed in the regular classroom. Those who are struggling to read want extra help that accelerates their learning and prepares them to handle rigorous intellectual work. Struggling learners respond positively to classroom programs that:

- are intellectually demanding
- reflect a depth of knowledge and understanding
- are connected to their lives, culture, and future beyond the classroom
- use technology to enhance learning
- provide opportunities for meaningful conversation
- encourage risk-taking
- encourage different viewpoints.

Research indicates that ...

- Instruction that supports higher intellectual demands and makes connections to the world is a key factor in improving the literacy of adolescents. (Newman and Associates, 1996)
- Adolescents respond positively to classroom conditions that include flexible time frames, collaboration, and a range of possible final products for student work. (Archbald and Newmann, 1998; Wiggins, 1998)
- Students respond positively to assessment that aligns with instruction and learning activities; that elicits best performance, effort, motivation, and commitment; that includes peer and self assessment; and that is reliable and equitable for all students. (Maxwell, vanKraayenoord, Field, and Herschell, 1996; Wiggins, 1998; Withers and McCurry, 1990)

8. Students who struggle with literacy need opportunities to reflect on thinking and learning, and to be more active and strategic learners.

Learners who are at risk need skills for learning how to learn. They need to see a real purpose for reading and writing that goes beyond busywork. They are motivated when they have evidence that reading and writing strategies really do lead to improved achievement and other successes in life.

Research indicates that ...

- Struggling adolescent readers need opportunities to choose their reading materials. This is critical for readers who may have had many years of failure and who may associate reading only with low-level information retrieval, dry writing exercises, assessment, or busywork. (Decker, 1996; Fischer, 1999)
- Adolescents can learn and practise successful techniques in reading. (Pressley, 1998)
- Adolescents working together in cooperative small teams or partnerships can improve their fluency, vocabulary, and reading comprehension. (Alfassi,1998; Fuchs, Fuchs, and Kazdan, 1999; Taylor and Nesheim, 2001)
- Learning activities must provide students with opportunities to experience success, receive positive reinforcement, and exercise some control over their learning process. (O'Brian et al., 1997)

9. Students who struggle with literacy need teachers who understand the influence of cultural and technological shifts.

Today's adolescents are exposed to technological and cultural influences that may be very different from what their teachers experienced in their own adolescent years. These influences include electronic texts (such as e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, newsgroups, Internet relay chats, websites, and computer games), as well as teenzines, videos, and more. Adolescents of the Net Generation often find their own reasons for becoming literate, beyond acquiring school knowledge. Teachers need to know about these influences and encourage their students to access a wide range of texts that they are interested in, and that promote their competence and confidence as readers and writers.

Research indicates that ...

- The identity formation and literacy achievement of adolescents are influenced by popular music, cultural texts, and other media. (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood, 1999; Christian-Smith, 1990; Gilbert and Taylor, 1991; Lewis, 2001; Moje et al., 2000/2001)
- Effective instruction for at-risk students recognizes the impact of online information and communication forms, and integrates these with the traditional text forms used in schools. (Alvermann, Moon, and Hagood, 1999; Alverman, 2001; Cope and Kalantzis, 2000)
- Technology that motivates students to become independent readers can increase their sense of competence. (Kamil, Intrator, and Kim, 2000)

10. Students who struggle with literacy need innovative and flexible school environments geared to their needs.

"The same old way" doesn't work for students who are at risk. Schools must provide innovative and strategic pathways to help these students develop the literacy and learning skills they need to succeed. Adolescents thrive when there is a match between the school environment and their developmental and academic needs. They respond to schooling that sustains their involvement and participation in learning; they thrive in school environments that recognize popular culture; and they benefit from innovations in teaching and student interaction.

Research indicates that ...

- Environments and lifestyles have changed over the years, and these changes have a strong influence on learning. School structures must change to reflect the needs of today's learners. (Luke et al. 2003)
- Adolescent learners require an environment that engages them in a purposeful and meaningful way, and that provides supportive instruction. (Taylor and Nesheim, 2001)
- To meet the needs of students at risk, schools must be restructured, renewed, and reformed. Curriculum and instruction must be integrated and developmentally appropriate. (Chadbourne, 2000; Hill and Russell, 1999; West and Lipsitz, 2000)

Cross-curricular literacy skills

Students in Grades 7 to 12 need well-developed literacy skills to succeed in all subject areas, and all subjects provide opportunities to develop those skills. In math, for example, students learn to identify the main idea in a word problem and use key words to determine what operation to use; in geography they construct and interpret maps, draw meaning from symbols, and make notes; in science and technology they build subject-specific vocabulary and interpret diagrams, charts, procedures, and safety information, and write lab reports. All subjects require students to connect with and build on their prior knowledge and experience – which is a key strategy for reading. All subjects also require students to communicate what they have learned, orally and in writing.

Content-area teachers can do the best job of teaching the reading and writing skills required by their discipline.

This teaching doesn't require "time out" from content-area instruction. It happens side by side with content acquisition. The objective is to increase content learning; the invaluable by-product is overall improvement in students' literacy skills.

When teachers of all subjects work together to equip their students with explicit strategies to improve reading, writing, and oral communication, they reinforce the students' ability to use those strategies across subject disciplines, in later grades, and beyond school. They make higher-level literacy both relevant and achievable in an idea-fuelled and information-driven world.

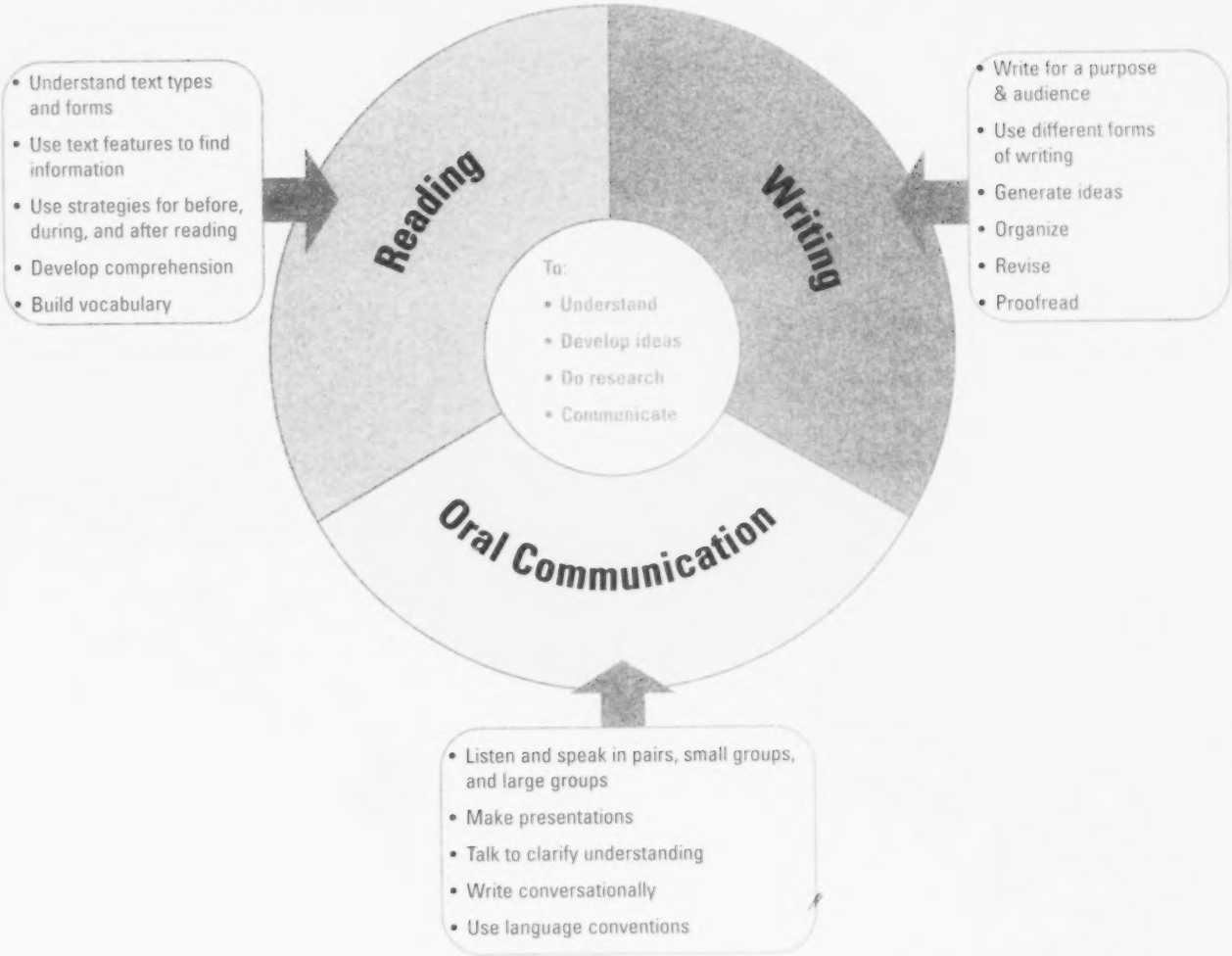
Literacy skills

Literacy involves reading, writing, and oral communication. (See Figure 1.) Critical thinking and affective (feeling) skills are common threads that run through all of these aspects of literacy, especially in the later grades. As the content becomes more complex, the literate learner relies more heavily on these higher-level skills to make meaning.

The individual classroom teacher ... is the critical contact through whom literacy can happen. By teaching the students the essential skills of reading, writing, listening and speaking, the teacher enables the students to make contact with someone else or something else and experience personal development through the adventure.... The task is too big and too important to be left with any teacher or a small group of teachers to accomplish alone.

Contacts: Teaching Communication Across the Curriculum. Costello, Palmer, and Smitheram, (p. 15).

Figure 1. Literacy skills for higher learning in all subjects



Oral communication

It is through listening and speaking that we develop vocabulary and learn how to put words together to form ideas, long before we ever read or write.

Most students learn to speak their first language naturally and out of necessity. Teachers can help students to develop their reading and writing skills by recognizing and building on the students' strengths in oral language, including strengths in a first language. When students discuss their prior knowledge of a topic or type of text before they read, they build the foundation for understanding that gives them the confidence to read a variety of texts. Similarly, students become confident and competent writers when they talk together at all stages of the writing process.

Oral language is the foundation for all literacy.

Effective oral communication skills help students to learn in all subject areas. The curriculum requires students to debate, defend ideas, build consensus in groups, present findings, and explain their reasoning concisely and clearly. It also requires them to listen actively in small and large groups.

The demands of effective oral communication can be onerous for many students. In fact, oral communication can be more demanding than reading and writing because there are fewer opportunities to revise after one has spoken or to listen closely to something once it has been said. As well, if a student's natural inclination or cultural background favours a thoughtful and quiet approach to communication, classroom discussions can be a major challenge. Students need to be "ready" for effective oral communication. Preparedness and practice enable students to become confident in their speaking and listening habits. To succeed they need good models for the various oral communication tasks, as well as opportunities to practise and develop their communication skills.[3]

Effective speakers and listeners are able to do the following:

- Promote dialogue and small-group discussions by waiting for a turn, contributing appropriately, listening, and staying on topic.
- Use formal and informal presentation skills (including persuasion and debate) to reach a target audience and achieve a clear purpose.
- Use listening skills to understand instructions, interpret meaning from the content, context, and tone, and interpret verbal and non-verbal cues.
- Use conventions of oral language, including vocabulary, structure, tone, and level of language.

[3] Adapted from *Reaching Higher: Making Connections Across the Curriculum*, p. 19, January 2002, www.reaching-higher.org.

Reading [4]

Reading is a complex process that involves a range of skills to support comprehension, organization, interpretation, and critical thinking. Students must use their reading skills to make connections with the text and to construct meaning from it. Each one of these required reading skills must be taught, modelled, and practised in all classrooms to help students become confident and competent readers.

Good readers have a range of reading strategies at their command.... Struggling readers have few strategies.

Good readers have a range of reading strategies at their command. They read with purpose; select, apply, and adjust their strategies; bring their prior knowledge to a text to help them understand it; and reflect on what they have read by asking questions of themselves and the text.

Struggling readers have few strategies. They read with a limited purpose; do not connect the text to their prior knowledge; and seldom reflect on their basic understanding of what they have to read. They may have difficulties even with basic decoding skills. They do not understand that reading has many purposes. Nor do they understand that they need to be flexible readers, taking different approaches to the various elements and parts of a text and using the features of different text forms to help predict the type of information they will find.

Effective readers are able to do the following:

- Understand a variety of text types and forms – informational (for example, text books, technical guides, manuals), graphic (for example, maps), and literary (for example, short stories).
- Use a range of reading strategies, such as identifying the purpose, applying prior knowledge, skimming and scanning, rereading, asking questions about the text, and predicting.
- Use comprehension strategies to make meaning – for example, by identifying directly and indirectly stated information, making connections, making judgments and drawing conclusions, reflecting critically, and using references to support opinions, positions, and judgements.
- Develop subject-specific vocabulary, including specialized or technical terms, strategies for vocabulary building (such as finding root words), figurative language, and idiom.
- Use features of text, such as headlines, graphics, layout, glossary, index, and table of contents.
- Understand text structures, such as paragraph organization, sentence types, and syntactic structure.

[4] Adapted from *Reaching Higher: Making Connections Across the Curriculum*, p. 2.

Writing[7]

Reading and writing skills are fundamentally linked. By improving their performance in one set of skills, students are able to improve their performance in the other.

Reading and writing skills are fundamentally linked.

On any given day, a student may be required to write a lab report, a literary essay, a letter, and a case study. Each of these writing tasks requires the student writer to use skills to achieve a particular effect, and a style that suits the form of writing. It is important, therefore, for students to be aware of the names and purposes of the various writing forms, to see concrete examples of them, to learn how to write them, and to practise writing them. Students also need opportunities to brainstorm ideas, to write drafts, and to have those drafts read by their peers so that they can improve the organization and clarity of their writing.

Effective writing requires a range of skills, which include mastering voice, organizing ideas and thoughts, and using language and language conventions appropriately. Effective writers use a writing process that involves stages before, during, and after writing, and this process influences how they articulate their thoughts.

Struggling writers, by contrast, may be discouraged by the many demands of the writing process. These demands may seem onerous rather than rewarding, and may result in frustration and a reluctance to write. Writing skills and the writing process must be taught, modelled, and practised in the classroom to help reluctant writers and to give them the confidence to succeed.

Effective writers are able to:

- Write in a variety of forms, such as lab reports, summaries, opinions, and essays.
- Identify and write for a target audience and clear purpose, using the appropriate tone and level of language.
- Use the writing process to select the topic, brainstorm, draft, confer with others, revise, and proofread.
- Generate ideas and content, including main idea, supporting detail, and engagement strategies (such as the appropriate voice).
- Use organizing skills, such as planning, sequencing, and identifying transitions and connections.
- Use the conventions of the language, including spelling, grammar, usage, and punctuation.

[7] Adapted from *Reaching Higher: Making Connections Across the Curriculum*, p. 14.

Developing research skills

Student success in school is linked closely to the ability to apply reading and writing in research. Effective researchers are able to do the following:

- Access information from various sources and media (for example, paper map vs. online map vs. geographical positioning system).
- Collect, organize, and synthesize information.
- Make notes.
- Use ideas from research to generate content.
- Write reports.
- Present findings orally or in writing.
- Identify sources and avoid plagiarism.

Helping students at risk

Literacy instruction that relates to the subject content can motivate students and help them to become responsible for their own learning. Adolescent students at risk generally require help with higher-level skills, and need to experience successes in reading, writing, and oral language in order to overcome past frustrations. For these students, a variety of approaches are important, including:

- integrated, hands-on activities
- use of technology
- cooperative learning
- rich, meaningful tasks
- explicit connections between what they know and need to know to achieve their personal and career goals
- ongoing assessment.

Using Think Literacy to promote learning

Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7–12, is a companion resource to this report. It offers practical classroom strategies, ideas for professional development, sample print-ready materials for teachers, and tips for helping struggling students. It shows how to weave literacy instruction into subject content, enabling students to:

- read for meaning
- generate ideas and write for a purpose
- communicate effectively in pairs, small groups, and large groups
- draw inferences and make connections
- build subject-specific vocabulary
- use conventions of language, such as spelling, punctuation, and paragraph structure ... and much more.

Think Literacy was developed by classroom teachers and consultants in adolescent literacy, Special Education, and English as a Second Language/English Skills Development, from school boards across Ontario, with support from the English-language Expert Panel on Students at Risk. It builds on other provincial resources, including the *Reaching Higher* Resource Package and Video.

Using information to improve student achievement

Information is the starting point for improving student achievement. A wide range of information helps educators to see what is and is not working in classrooms and at the school and board levels, and points the way to changes that will reduce the gap between high- and low-performing students, while maintaining high standards for all students.

Educators at all levels contribute information to improve achievement, and draw on a rich array of information contributed by others. They use information to choose instructional approaches and assessment strategies; to identify and support students who are struggling; and to engage in improvement planning and team development.

Systematic improvement planning is key to helping students who are at risk in literacy. Because reading, writing, and oral language skills are developed over time, students need the benefit of planning that spans grades and subjects, and that helps them in the transition from one school to another. School teams and groups of schools representing both the elementary and secondary panels must work together to identify meaningful and attainable goals for the literacy achievement of all students, and identify strategies that will lead to positive improvement over time – particularly for students at risk in Grades 7 to 12. For students at risk, it is important that schools and the school board move to K-to-12 improvement planning that draws on a range of relevant information, including the results of province-wide testing in Grades 3 and 6 and the OSSLT.[6]

Resources for improvement planning

For more information on improvement planning, see:

- *School Improvement Planning: A Handbook for Principals, Teachers, and School Councils.* Toronto: Education Improvement Commission, 2000.
- *EQAO Guide to School and Board Improvement Planning.* Toronto: Education Quality and Accountability Office, 2002.

[6] Province-wide tests are administered by the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO), a crown agency established in 1996 to measure and communicate the achievement of students, schools, and school boards in the publicly funded school system.

Types of information

Figure 2 shows a range of information that can be used for improvement planning in the classroom and at the school and board levels.

Figure 2. Sources of information to improve student learning

Classrooms	Schools	Boards
Teachers use: • diagnostic data • student interest and attitude surveys • formative assessment data • summative assessment data • report card and attendance information • EQAO results for individual students • annual education and/or transition plans	Principals and school teams use: • report card information • student demographic information • enrolment and attendance data • promotion, transfer, and retention information • disciplinary action records • student and parent surveys • annual education and/or transition plans for students • action research findings • EQAO results for students, school, and board	Administrators and leaders for students at risk use: • EQAO school, board, and provincial data • student demographic information • board-developed information instruments • national and international assessment data • program effectiveness surveys, which include data from *Choices Into Action* (CIA) and *Cooperative Education*.

Teachers gather *qualitative* data daily as they make observations about students' progress and provide immediate feedback – by listening to students' questions and answers in groups and with the class, by talking with them, and by reading their written work. Teachers also gather *quantitative* data as they evaluate student work and report on achievement in a variety of assignments, presentations, and tests.

When working with students at risk, teachers access and interpret data from a variety of additional sources, such as provincial test scores and reports for individual students and groups of students, to identify patterns that could help determine appropriate instructional approaches and assessment and evaluation strategies.

Principals have many sources of information to study at the school level when planning their support for students at risk. These sources include:

- information and observations reported by teachers about students' current progress
- student demographic information
- diagnostic tests, standardized tests, and EQAO provincial tests
- enrolment data, including transfers and attendance patterns
- guidance records, including career and annual education plans and school involvement
- disciplinary action records
- student and parent surveys.

Principals use data to design a school improvement plan. Working with the school team, they analyse and interpret the data with the school team to make decisions that will have a positive impact on student learning, in areas such as:

- instructional approaches, including student groupings, supports and interventions, teaching strategies, and learning resources
- scheduling practices, including timetable, blocks of uninterrupted time, and innovative school organizations
- budget and resource allocations
- home and community connections.

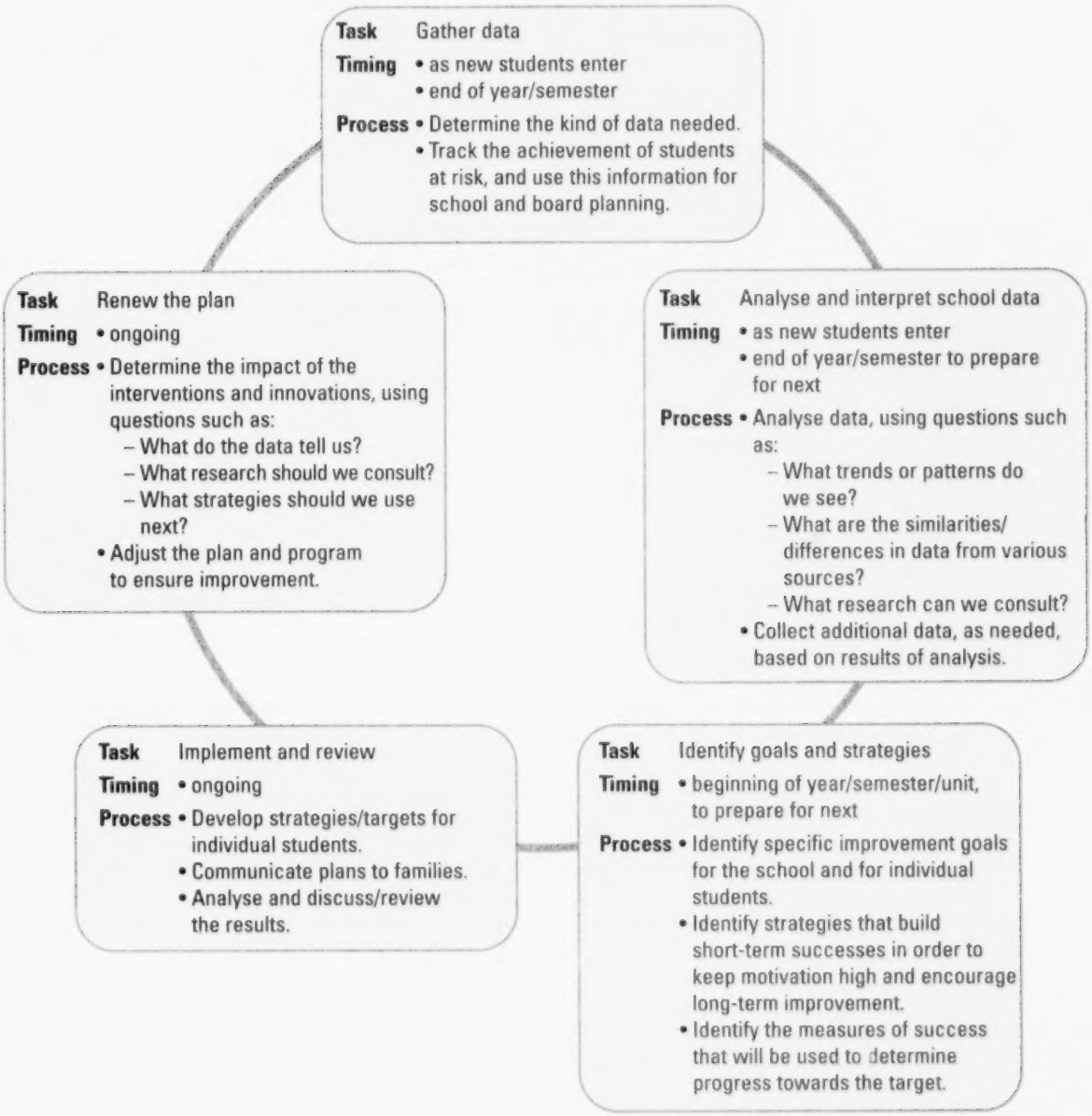
Leaders for students at risk study data from a district-wide perspective. Collaboratively, with the at-risk committees and principals of Grades 7 to 12, leaders examine the full range of available data, addressing system issues in a board improvement plan. The goals, strategies, and measures of success focus on supports for change, including training, resources, instruction, and assessment.

Leaders for students at risk support schools in accessing and interpreting data to identify students at risk. The way to build early momentum is to make use of data so that principals, teachers, and students can see clearly the connection between their efforts and their accomplishments. The need for momentum and measurable, immediate success is especially critical for students who are at risk.

The improvement planning cycle

Figure 3 shows how boards, principals, and school literacy teams use information in ongoing planning to improve the literacy achievement of students at risk.

Figure 3. Using data in the improvement planning cycle

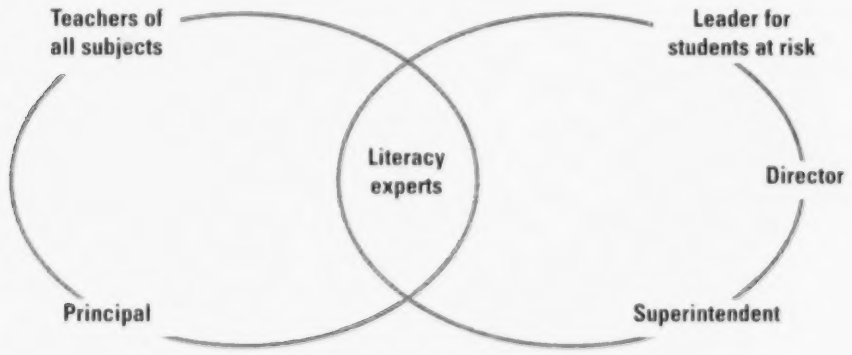

Task Gather data
Timing • as new students enter
• end of year/semester
Process • Determine the kind of data needed.
• Track the achievement of students at risk, and use this information for school and board planning.
Task Analyse and interpret school data
Timing • as new students enter
• end of year/semester to prepare for next
Process • Analyse data, using questions such as:
– What trends or patterns do we see?
– What are the similarities/differences in data from various sources?
– What research can we consult?
• Collect additional data, as needed, based on results of analysis.
Task Identify goals and strategies
Timing • beginning of year/semester/unit, to prepare for next
Process • Identify specific improvement goals for the school and for individual students.
• Identify strategies that build short-term successes in order to keep motivation high and encourage long-term improvement.
• Identify the measures of success that will be used to determine progress towards the target.
Task Implement and review
Timing • ongoing
Process • Develop strategies/targets for individual students.
• Communicate plans to families.
• Analyse and discuss/review the results.
Task Renew the plan
Timing • ongoing
Process • Determine the impact of the interventions and innovations, using questions such as:
– What do the data tell us?
– What research should we consult?
– What strategies should we use next?
• Adjust the plan and program to ensure improvement.

Roles and responsibilities of educators

It takes dedicated teamwork to ensure that all students have the literacy skills they need for success. This section describes the key roles and responsibilities of school staff, board staff, and trustees in making literacy a priority and focus in all classrooms.

Figure 4 shows the roles described in this section. For the roles of school volunteers, family, and community members, see section 6, "Family and Community Connections."

Figure 4. Literacy leaders in schools and at the board



Teachers

All teachers are teachers of literacy. Teachers make a difference in their students' learning when they understand that students have different learning needs, strengths, and interests, and that all students have the right to achieve the highest possible level of literacy. They base their classroom practices on research, regularly assess achievement, diagnose gaps, provide instruction that meets the specific learning needs of their students, and create an organized and stimulating learning environment. They do not work alone, but see themselves as part of a team committed to supporting every student's achievement.

Teachers need the support of school and system leaders who can help them get the knowledge, skills, and resources they need, and find innovative, effective solutions for their students who are at risk. Teachers also need the support of families and community agencies.

"The most powerful feature of schools, in terms of developing children as readers and writers, is the quality of classroom instruction. Effective schools are simply schools where there are more classrooms where high-quality reading and writing instruction is regularly available. No school with mediocre classroom instruction ever became effective just by adding a high-quality remedial or resource room program."

Allington (2001), p. 111.

The teacher's role involves:

- planning and organizing to meet individual student needs
- motivating students to learn
- teaching literacy skills in the subject context
- assessing student achievement
- working with colleagues
- making connections with families and the community.

Planning and organizing

Teachers adapt their instruction to meet the needs and current development of students at risk. This includes:

- providing classroom time for literacy instruction and extended time for meaningful practice of skills
- providing differentiated instructional and assessment strategies that are appropriate to each students' age, interests, and learning needs
- seeking additional advice to help students who are failing to meet curriculum expectations.

Motivating students to learn

Teachers have a pivotal role in helping students maintain a positive attitude towards learning and literacy. This is particularly important for students who are at risk of failing to meet curriculum expectations. Their role includes:

- engaging students in tasks and assessments that simulate real-world environments beyond the classroom walls
- using a variety of technologies that allow students to gather information and solve problems
- providing a rich and varied literacy environment that reflects the cultural diversity of the school
- providing opportunities for students to choose their own reading material
- providing opportunities for discussion and group work to engage students in learning.

Teaching literacy skills

Teachers need to understand the complexities of literacy and need to have the skills to implement effective literacy instruction in the subject area. This includes:

- understanding the literacy demands of the subject area
- modelling and teaching the reading, writing, and oral language skills that students need in the subject area
- helping students make connections between reading and writing in the subject area, across the curriculum, and to the world beyond the classroom.

Assessing student achievement

Teachers know that ongoing assessment is fundamentally important for guiding instruction that will address students' learning needs. This includes:

- providing students with clear, consistent assessment criteria and processes that support their learning
- using observation and a variety of formative and summative assessment practices to identify each student's learning needs and to determine the best instructional approach
- providing students with ongoing meaningful and personal feedback on their work.

Working with colleagues

Teachers understand the value of working collaboratively with other teachers and the principal to ensure that students' learning is improved through coordinated, complementary approaches to literacy instruction. This includes:

- meeting regularly with colleagues to engage in professional dialogue and share resources that promote best practices
- participating in cross-grade/cross-panel/cross-subject discussions about student achievement, student learning needs, and instructional and assessment practices
- helping to establish school literacy goals, strategies, and measures
- engaging in professional development related to improving literacy skills for students at risk.

Making connections with families and the community

Teachers know the value of family support for student learning. They have a vital role in establishing links with students' families and in promoting respect for the cultural diversity of their students. Their role includes:

- using resources that respect diversity and recognize individuals
- providing a welcoming environment that affirms all students and their families
- working with family members and the community to promote student learning
- allowing students to acquire and process information in their first language, and then express it in the language of instruction
- maintaining high expectations for all students.

Principals

Principals are curriculum leaders who make literacy a school priority. They work collaboratively with school staff to build a professional learning community focused on literacy. They ensure that the school literacy plan includes provisions for students at risk. Principals pay special attention to finding and developing school leaders, providing opportunities for shared learning, and building support for the school literacy plan.

The principal has a direct impact on learning for all students by:

- understanding the reading and writing processes and the components of effective literacy instruction, and discussing these with teachers and families
- establishing an expectation of high achievement for all students, and setting goals that improve student achievement
- developing a school literacy plan as part of the school improvement plan, in consultation with staff and the school council (see the sidebar, "Developing the literacy component of the school improvement plan")
- allocating the school budget to give priority to literacy goals – for example, by providing classroom and library resources, time for teamwork, and professional development
- organizing the school around the learning needs of students
- sharing leadership with classroom and specialist teachers
- promoting learning teams, where teachers learn and work together to pursue clearly articulated school-based goals for literacy
- supporting literacy instruction through focused classroom visits
- supporting teaching that builds on the cultural backgrounds and first languages of students
- promoting home/school/community partnerships
- facilitating interventions and learning supports for students who are failing to meet the curriculum expectations, when excellent classroom teaching is not enough
- encouraging innovations, including:
  - short-term research-based interventions that address specific needs or gaps in learning
  - timetables that provide remedial help at appropriate times and in appropriate settings during the school day
  - strategies for tracking students who are at risk
  - flexible programs offered during the day and after school.

Also see "Supporting innovation in schools," on page 41.

Developing the literacy component of the school improvement plan

Every school improvement plan should include literacy goals, strategies, and measures. The literacy component of the plan includes instructional approaches to improve the learning of students at risk, professional development for teachers, and strategies for family and community involvement in literacy. The role of the principal is to guide the school literacy team in:

- gathering, analysing, and interpreting school data
- establishing goals based on the data
- developing strategies to achieve the goals
- establishing measures of success
- supporting teachers in implementing the literacy strategies and ensuring that literacy remains a priority in the daily life of the school
- monitoring and reviewing the implementation
- celebrating student achievements and staff literacy learning
- renewing the plan.

Literacy experts

All educators need expertise in literacy development. To grow and sustain this expertise, boards and schools can identify literacy leaders or experts in their midst. A literacy expert has the following characteristics:

- high expectations for the literacy achievement of all students
- expertise in literacy instruction for adolescents
- skill in using data to support student literacy achievement
- understanding of the literacy demands of various subjects and grades
- demonstrated success with students at risk
- knowledge of current research in adolescent learning and literacy for students at risk.

Responsibilities of board literacy experts

The main responsibilities for board literacy experts include:

- promoting cross-curricular literacy by:
  - encouraging the integration of literacy in all subject areas
  - supporting school literacy teams and the board-wide literacy committee
  - coordinating and providing leadership for the board literacy program

- supporting student achievement by:
  - encouraging and supporting the use of student achievement data
  - working with school teams to support students at risk
- supporting ongoing professional development by:
  - sharing literacy resources and recent research with school and board staff
  - informing school administrators about ongoing professional development opportunities
- encouraging family and community involvement in literacy learning by:
  - understanding the rich diversity of cultures and languages among students and their families, and the characteristics of literacy learning in those cultures and languages
  - sharing effective learning strategies and practices
  - promoting home-school connections that support literacy
  - serving as a resource for community literacy development.

Board-wide literacy committee

The board-wide literacy committee is responsible for developing goals, strategies, and measures to implement cross-curricular literacy to improve the achievement of all students in Grades 7 to 12, with a focus on the needs of students at risk. The committee includes representatives from across subjects, across the elementary and secondary panels, and the voice of parents and community partners.

The committee embarks on a process to extend their own knowledge and expertise about adolescent literacy for students at risk, including effective programs and resources. With this expertise, they develop a system-wide plan that includes:

- professional development for educators
- training for volunteers
- processes for identifying and monitoring students at risk
- program priorities, including system-wide remedial programs.

School literacy team

The school literacy team is responsible for developing goals, strategies, and measures to implement cross-curricular literacy to improve the achievement of all students, with a focus on the needs of students at risk. The team includes teachers from across subjects and grades, and the voice of parents and community partners.

The team embarks on a process to extend their own knowledge and expertise about adolescent literacy for students at risk, including effective programs and resources. The role of the team might include:

- sharing their knowledge with all teachers
- reviewing the school timetable to ensure that it supports student literacy

- reviewing and recommending professional and classroom resources to support literacy
- reviewing the school's remedial strategies for literacy and making appropriate recommendations
- developing a professional development plan for teachers
- establishing community links that support literacy growth for at-risk students
- building links with neighbouring elementary and secondary schools to ease the transition for students and to share successful practices
- reviewing student achievement data and other relevant information in order to identify and track the progress of at-risk students
- monitoring the effectiveness of programs, interventions, and resources.

Leaders for students at risk

Funding for the board role of leader for students at risk was announced by the Ministry of Education in March 2003, in response to the Rozanski report and the report of the Working Group on Students at Risk.

The leader is a coalition builder and capacity builder who leads colleagues to a deep and rich understanding of the barriers to achievement for students at risk. He or she is dedicated to developing and implementing strategies and programs to ensure that students graduate with the literacy and numeracy skills they need for a seamless transition to the workplace, college, or university.

The leader is a champion for integrating literacy across the curriculum, in order to equip students to meet the diploma requirements. With that in mind, the leader is responsible for:

- establishing an influential board-wide steering committee that includes senior board administrators, literacy and numeracy, coordinators, principals, teachers, and community partners at the school and system levels, and that is integral to the operation of the school board as a whole
- working with the steering committee to establish a district-wide vision and guiding principles for literacy, numeracy, and program pathways for students at risk, ensuring that these align with the board's mission and priorities
- reviewing existing achievement data and practices in order to identify successes and needs across the district
- drawing on information from leaders across the province to build a broader, clearer picture of what works in support of students at risk
- helping schools to build community relationships
- supporting schools that have innovative ideas to help students who are at risk, by engaging the schools in action research to determine the effectiveness of the innovations

- developing a district-wide plan that builds on successes and closes gaps for students at risk, and that includes priorities, timelines, actions, resource requirements, communication strategies, and benchmarks for success
- working with provincial, district and school literacy experts to implement a professional development and training plan for teachers, administrators, volunteers, and community partners. The plan:
  - builds knowledge and understanding of the adolescent learner
  - builds knowledge and understanding of the skills needed to teach literacy and numeracy in an integrated program
  - activates and cultivates leaders at all levels
  - facilitates the development of collegial learning communities within and among schools, and across the elementary and secondary panels
  - identifies literacy resources to support teachers and principals
  - encourages the use of data to assess the current situation, set targets for improvement, and plan how to achieve the targets
  - provides sustained pressure and support for solutions that have a direct positive impact on students at risk.
- leading the implementation of the Grade 12 Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) so that it is available to all students who need it.

Superintendents

Success in literacy must be a concrete goal, which results in tangible actions by teachers, administrators, and superintendents. Superintendents are responsible for embedding literacy goals and actions into board improvement plans, and ensuring that principals include a literacy component in their school improvement plans.

Superintendents support literacy goals by:

- articulating a system-wide vision of high achievement and commitment to literacy
- promoting the use of effective assessment and instructional strategies and setting clear and measurable goals that improve student achievement
- building leadership capacity throughout the board – for example, by creating collegial learning teams of administrators, focused on literacy instruction
- allocating resources based on student needs
- facilitating dialogue between the elementary and secondary school panels
- advocating to support students at risk, in partnership with the director and other education partners
- supporting innovation at the school level – for example, modified timetables to improve student learning and enable professional development. (See "Supporting innovation in schools" on page 41.)

Supporting innovation in schools

School and board administrators have a vital role in supporting innovation to improve student learning. Principals need the flexibility to create alternative schedules and programs that meet the unique needs of their students and communities. For example, they might:

- create a "school within a school," where a group of students with particular needs follows a different timetable and possibly a different curriculum
- use the Learning Opportunities Grant (LOG) to offer literacy and numeracy workshops for families of struggling students, so that they are better equipped to support their child's learning
- use the *Choices Into Action* (CIA) program, including the Teacher-Adviser Program (TAP), for targeted literacy instruction or school-wide reading and writing programs
- in a secondary school, use locally developed 220-hour single-credit courses to offer extended learning time in English, Math, and Science to students in Grades 9 and 10 – counting each course as two credits for funding purposes (see "Student-Focused Funding: Technical Paper, 2003–04" (Spring 2003), from the Ministry of Education).

Directors

The primary role of the director is to build a framework in which all partners in education share responsibility for student learning. The director does this by:

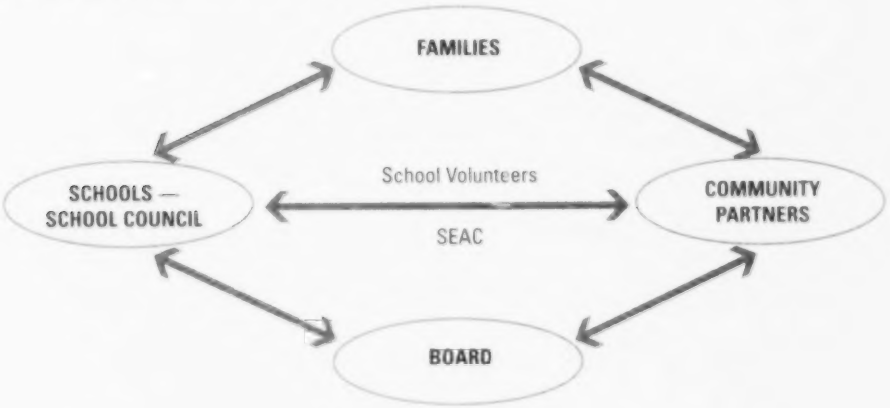
- facilitating a system-wide commitment to literacy
- promoting the use of effective assessment and instructional strategies that improve student achievement
- ensuring that policies and practices align at the provincial, board, school, and classroom levels
- ensuring professional development for principals, with a focus on literacy leadership
- supporting innovative programs for students at risk.

Family and community connections

Literacy and learning are not school issues alone: they are family and community issues as well. Public education is rooted in the conviction that schools, families, and communities are partners in support of student achievement. It can be hard work to make substantial connections, but literacy – a tool that builds and sustains communities – can provide the focus for actions that lead to genuine improvements in student learning.

Figure 5 shows the key partners described in this section.

Figure 5. Partners in literacy for students at risk



Families can support students in literacy by:

- understanding that they have a key role in the literacy development of their children
- supporting their children at home in reading and writing in the family's first language and in the language of instruction
- helping students to get the supports they need for growth in literacy
- showing students how the curriculum relates to life beyond school
- networking with other families to share effective family practices that promote literacy development
- building working relationships with teachers
- engaging with schools in relationships that support students at risk in literacy.

Schools can make a difference in the success of their students at risk by:

- ensuring that teachers are aware of community resources that support students who are at risk in literacy
- building relationships with families and the community
- identifying and actively supporting appropriate community-based literacy programs
- making students and their families aware of school, board, and community programs that have a literacy component geared to their specific needs
- engaging school councils in improvement planning, including initiatives that support adolescent literacy.

School boards support strong family and community connections by:

- establishing district-wide partnerships with associations, service agencies, colleges and universities, and local businesses and employers that have an interest in youth
- ensuring that schools and teachers are aware of community resources that support students at risk for literacy
- providing information about board plans and programs that support literacy
- involving the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC) to advise on plans and decisions that affect exceptional students
- providing literacy training and support for volunteers and school councils.

Community partners can support students by:

- helping students to get the supports they need for literacy
- showing students how the curriculum relates to life beyond school
- supporting the literacy development of students.

Promoting family involvement

Research confirms that parents can profoundly influence the academic success of their children. Schools and boards promote family involvement by:

- providing families with clear information about the curriculum in a variety of forms and on a regular basis – through handouts to students, family newsletters, websites, information nights, school bulletin boards, and more
- providing clear and timely assessment information and guidance when a student is achieving below the provincial standard, or when there are other indications that the student may be at risk
- making it easy for families to contact the school – by phone, e-mail, and scheduled visits
- offering workshops and advice for parents and families about how they can support their children's literacy

- recognizing and celebrating the first languages and cultures of students and their families
- creating a section in the school library to support families and the community in literacy
- welcoming and training family volunteers.

Parent organizations in Ontario

Organizations that promote family involvement in education include the Ontario Parent Council (OPC); the Ontario Association of Parents in Catholic Education (OAPCE); the Ontario Federation of Home and School Associations (OFHSA); and *Parents partenaires en éducation* (PPE, a provincial association of French parents).

Involving the school council

Every publicly funded school in Ontario is required by legislation to have a school council that includes parents as a majority of its members, as well as a representative from the community at large. The school council may decide to assist in promoting literacy by:

- providing input to the school literacy plan to support the learning of all students
- helping to communicate the school literacy plan to all families
- organizing family information/training sessions for all families in the community, using guest speakers and school staff to increase understanding of literacy issues
- supporting the development and sharing of family literacy resources for all parents
- encouraging other parents and family members to attend school council meetings and family information sessions
- advising the principal on how to reach and support families from diverse backgrounds, cultures, and languages.

Principals, superintendents, and leaders for students at risk all have a role in ensuring that school councils have access to current research on literacy education that can help them to provide input to the school literacy plan.

Involving the Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC)

The Education Act and related regulations require each school board to establish a Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC). The SEAC advises the board on special education programs and services for exceptional students, participates in the board's annual review of its Special Education Plan, and participates in the board's annual budget process, as it relates to special education. SEAC members include representatives

from local associations affiliated with provincial or national associations that support the interests of exceptional students and their families. These representatives express the concerns of parents of exceptional students, and can draw upon the resources and expertise of the parent organizations they represent.

Although they are not required to do so, SEACs often advocate on behalf of at-risk students by advising boards about:

- effective programs and practices related to early identification and early intervention
- the sharing of effective practices among schools and school boards
- relevant and timely research
- board policies, program implementation, and student assessment practices
- professional development needs for principals, teachers, teachers' assistants, and other professionals.

Working with organizations in the community

Schools and the leaders for students at risk can help to close the literacy gap for students at risk by collaborating with existing literacy programs and with youth organizations, such as Scouts and Guides, boys' and girls' clubs, cultural and faith community groups, Big Sister and Big Brother agencies, Aboriginal Friendship Centres, 4-H clubs, YMCA, YWCA, and other municipally-sponsored youth programs in public libraries and community centres.

Individual schools can make these connections in their immediate community. School boards also need to take the lead in establishing district-wide partnerships. Leaders for students at risk have a key role to play in this.

The Ontario Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities produces a directory of the community literacy programs in the province. It lists the programs by city and town, province-wide networks, and special interests (for example, family literacy). Copies are available from the following address:

AlphaPlus Centre
2040 Yonge Street, 3rd Floor
Toronto ON M4S 1Z9

Tel: 416 322-1012 or 1-800-788-1120
TTY: 416 322-5751 or 1-800-788-1912
Fax: 416 322-0780 or 1-800-788-1417
E-mail: info@alphaplus.ca
Website: http://alphaplus.ca

Programs to promote literacy

The following types of programs can be offered in schools or in the community to help adolescent students develop their interest and skills in reading, writing, and oral language, and bridge the literacy gap for students at risk:

- family literacy programs, including workshops for families about how to support their children's literacy development
- reading circles and book clubs
- *reader's choice* programs, such as the Red Maple Awards and the White Pine Awards offered by the Ontario Library Association, which encourage students to vote on their favourite books
- drama clubs
- homework clubs and study circles – for remedial help and enrichment
- test preparation classes
- computer classes and workshops
- cultural centres
- store-front outreach programs
- mentoring and peer tutoring.

Recruiting and training volunteers

Literacy volunteers – including family members, community members, and students – can greatly enrich school programs and broaden the range of activities that are available to students. An effective school-based volunteer program is well organized at the school level, and supported by the board with training and resources.

Potential sources of volunteers include parents and other family members, community agencies, service clubs, volunteer centres, local colleges and universities, cultural and faith community groups, local employers and unions, local businesses serving youth and their families, seniors' groups, and retirees.

Family and community volunteers can get involved in many ways, such as:

- serving as guest readers
- participating in classroom or school events (e.g., author days, literacy nights)
- promoting literacy nights
- serving as a bridge between the school and community.

Supports for training volunteers

Literacy volunteers must be properly trained. This may include orientation to the school and training in strategies for supporting literacy.

Resources for training literacy volunteers are available from several community organizations, including Frontier College, public libraries, Laubach Literacy, and the Ontario Literacy Coalition.

Students themselves – including many who may be considered at risk – have a wide range of skills and knowledge, and can become effective literacy volunteers, both in the school and out in the community. Ways in which student volunteers can support literacy achievement include:

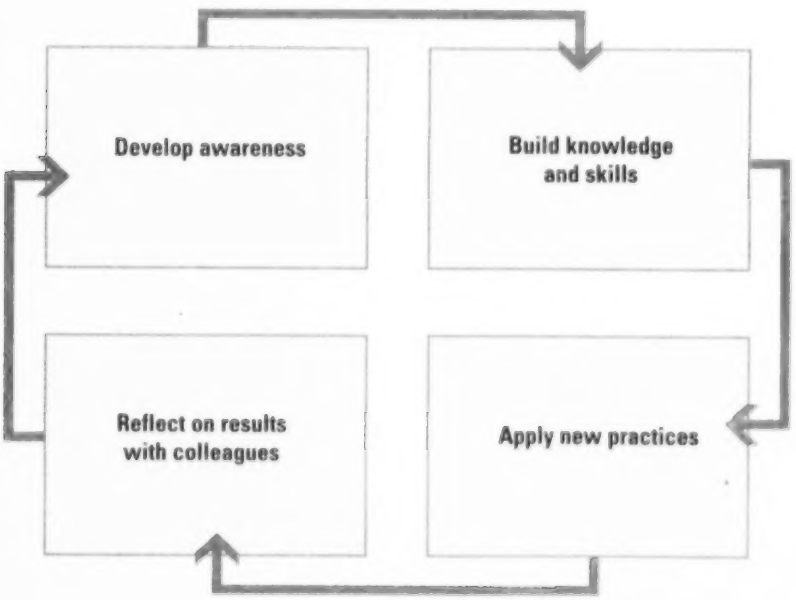
- peer tutoring, including online peer support
- co-op education placement in elementary schools
- volunteer placement in community literacy programs
- student-led book talks
- student council literacy initiatives
- student-led literacy committee
- student membership on the school literacy team.

Professional development (PD)

The objective of professional development in literacy is to improve student learning by expanding what teachers and administrators know about how students become proficient readers, writers, speakers, and listeners in all subject areas, and by providing opportunities to put that knowledge into practice.

Successful professional development is research-based, practical, and tied in a meaningful way to the Ontario curriculum. It links to the goals of the whole school and whole board to sustain improvement. It builds on educators' knowledge and understanding, encouraging them to reflect on their current practices and broaden their repertoire of strategies and skills. Good professional development includes opportunities for teachers to link their new knowledge to their existing classroom practices. This involves trying out new strategies with students, then connecting with colleagues to share successes and to give and receive support for continued professional growth. The process is cyclical, as shown in Figure 6.

Figure 6. The professional development cycle



Professional development planning

The **leader for students at risk** works with teachers and principals to set a comprehensive, sequential, and long-range board-wide plan for professional development. The plan:

- outlines goals, strategies, and measures to implement cross-curricular literacy
- deepens the understanding of learning processes, adolescent literacy, and assessment practices
- extends the repertoire of instructional strategies that engage adolescent learners
- facilitates the development of professional learning communities within and among schools and across panels
- identifies literacy resources for teachers and principals
- promotes dialogue between elementary and secondary panels.

Superintendents support professional development throughout the board by:

- establishing PD policies that support the innovative delivery of PD
- facilitating the development of collegial learning communities within and among schools
- participating with school staff in professional development related to literacy improvement for students at risk
- facilitating dialogue between the elementary and secondary school panels
- seeking the advice of the board's Special Education Advisory Committee (SEAC), school councils, and other community partners for board-wide literacy planning
- providing principals with the resources, skills, and knowledge to fulfil their roles effectively, with respect to the at-risk initiative
- recognizing and celebrating participation in professional development.

Principals support professional development by:

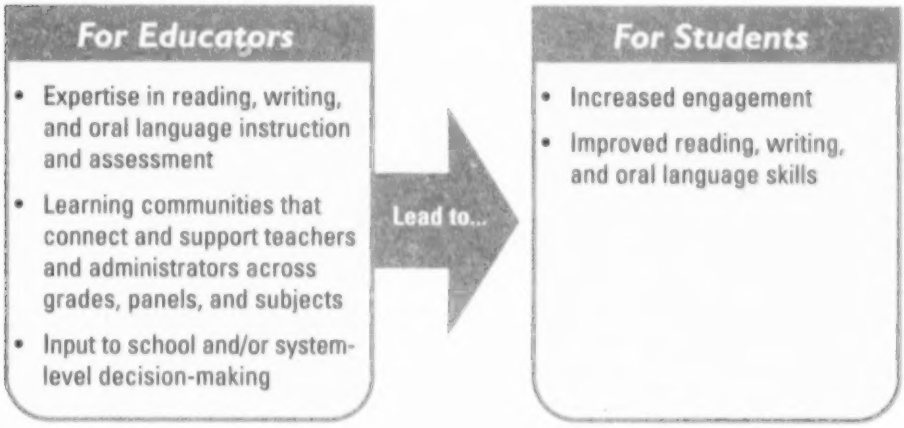
- setting school professional development plans for literacy as part of the school improvement plan
- participating with school staff in professional development related to literacy improvement for students at risk.

Teachers support personal and collegial professional development by:

- meeting regularly with colleagues to plan cooperatively, share teaching ideas and strategies, share professional reading, visit other classrooms, and discuss their observations
- participating in cross-grade/cross-panel/cross-subject discussions and professional development
- helping to set school literacy goals, strategies, and measures
- expanding their repertoire of instructional strategies and classroom resources to promote literacy in their subject area.

Figure 7 illustrates the underlying goals for professional development in literacy.

Figure 7. Goals for professional development in literacy


For Educators
• Expertise in reading, writing, and oral language instruction and assessment
• Learning communities that connect and support teachers and administrators across grades, panels, and subjects
• Input to school and/or system-level decision-making
Lead to...
For Students
• Increased engagement
• Improved reading, writing, and oral language skills

Professional development opportunities

Opportunities for professional development can take many forms and may incorporate, but are not limited to, the following:

- sustained collegial dialogue
- coaching, mentoring, and visiting the classrooms of colleagues
- professional networks – within the school, among schools, and across the elementary and secondary school panels
- staff meetings, department meetings, and regular strategy sessions
- Professional Activity days
- study groups and sharing sessions
- institutes and conferences
- speakers
- self-directed study and personal reflection
- online courses
- Additional Qualification (AQ) courses
- action research – combining classroom practice with study and reflection on the results.

Figure 8 lists themes for professional development that can help teachers meet the curriculum expectations and equip their students with the literacy skills to succeed in the subject area.

Figure 8. PD themes to promote literacy across the curriculum

LEARNING PROCESSES AND THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

- Understanding learning styles, and the at-risk learner
- Gathering and interpreting assessment data
- Providing differentiated instruction
- Engaging the reluctant learner
- Involving families and communities to support student learning
- Creating a safe, orderly, supportive learning environment that invites risk-taking
- Using innovative school and classroom structures (such as modified timetables)
- Choosing literacy resources that interest students, link to the curriculum, and improve learning
- Using technology to develop literacy skills

ORAL LANGUAGE

- Developing oral communication skills for the subject area, including:
  - presentation skills
  - active listening
- Using speaking and listening skills to support reading, writing, advanced reasoning, and positive interaction with others
- Exploring subject-specific vocabulary and language

WRITING

- Writing in different forms for the subject area (e.g., lab reports, persuasive essays, procedures, narratives, recounts)
- Using the writing process in the subject area
- Improving writing through strategies for before, during, and after writing
- Using templates and graphic organizers to help with complex writing tasks
- Using writing to support advanced reasoning in the subject
- Exploring subject-specific vocabulary and language

READING

- Understanding features of text in subject-specific materials
- Reading aloud, shared reading, and guided reading
- Improving reading with strategies for before, during, and after reading
- Using graphic organizers and advanced reasoning skills to understand subject content and develop critical thinking
- Understanding subject-specific vocabulary and language

Building learning communities

Principals and leaders for students at risk have a critical role in helping teachers to develop learning communities. Effective learning communities bridge the divide between subjects, grades, schools, and panels. Where distance and time constraints make it difficult for colleagues to connect, technology (such as e-mail and board-wide computer networks) can help to keep the lines of communication open.

Principals, leaders for students at risk, and superintendents support learning communities by:

- creating a culture for professional learning, characterized by trust, collaboration, a thirst for new knowledge, a sense of community, and a commitment to the school and board vision
- ensuring that the goals of the learning community align with the literacy goals of the school and board
- ensuring that learning communities include people in a variety of roles
- providing opportunities for members to meet and collaborate on a regular basis
- providing access to communications technology, such as computer networks, and the training to use it.

Promoting learning

Motivated and confident students are more likely to read, write, listen, and speak in order to acquire and reinforce their learning. Teachers who understand the learning needs of their students, who believe that their students can achieve in the subject, and who are equipped with proven instructional strategies and resources help their students to develop positive attitudes towards learning and literacy. Professional development builds positive beliefs and attitudes about learning, literacy, and the nature of at-risk students.

Recommendations to promote innovation and accountability for adolescent literacy

The Expert Panel on Students at Risk offers the following recommendations to guide schools and school boards in allocating funds and human resources to support literacy across the curriculum in Grades 7–12, particularly for students at risk. The recommendations provide guidance for spending the $50 million in funding for students at risk announced by the Minister of Education in March 2003.

Funding is important, but funding alone will not make the difference for students who lack the reading, writing, and oral language skills to succeed. Schools and school boards must be free to provide innovative programs and supports that engage adolescents who are at risk, and raise their level of achievement. Educators need to work together to develop improvement plans and engage in pilot projects and action research that build expertise, encourage positive change, and promote accountability.

These panel recommendations focus on the following themes:

- Developing expertise
- Using information
- Supporting students at risk
- Promoting effective practices and innovations.

Developing expertise

The Expert Panel recommends:

1. (a) THAT all boards have a board-wide literacy committee responsible for developing goals, strategies, and measures to implement cross-curricular literacy; and

   (b) THAT the committee include representatives from across subjects and across the elementary and secondary panels, and the voice of parents and community partners.

2. (a) THAT all schools have a school-based literacy team responsible for developing goals, strategies, and measures to implement cross-curricular literacy as part of their school improvement plan; and

   (b) THAT the team include representatives from across subjects and grades, and the voice of parents and community partners.

3. THAT each board provide literacy training and resources for:
   - senior board administrators, central program staff, and leaders for students at risk
   - members of the board-wide literacy committee
   - school principals and vice-principals
   - members of the school literacy team for schools with Grades 7–12
   - volunteers, including parents, students, and community partners.
4. THAT each board provide ongoing professional development for teachers of all subjects in Grades 7–12, which includes planned, sequenced, and sustained training in adolescent literacy and assessment.

Using information

The Expert Panel recommends:

5. THAT schools annually identify and track students in Grades 7–12 who show indications of being at risk in literacy, with attention to students in the transitional years from Grades 6 to 7 and Grades 8 to 9.
6. THAT boards:
   (a) design and share a Grade 7–12 mechanism that schools can use to track students who are at risk;
   (b) collect and analyse information about students at risk;
   (c) provide professional development to help schools implement the tools and tracking mechanisms; and
   (d) monitor the success of literacy interventions for students who are at risk in Grades 7–12.

Supporting students at risk

The Expert Panel recommends:

7. THAT boards ensure timely access to the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Course (OSSLC) for all students who need it, and provide appropriate teaching and learning resources to support the course. Where low enrolment makes it difficult to offer the course in all schools, boards should devise innovative alternatives, such as clustering with other schools and providing transportation to other sites.
8. THAT boards support training for student tutors and access to tutors in the classroom.

Promoting effective practices and innovations

The Expert Panel recommends:

9. THAT leaders for students at risk work with the Ministry of Education to:

   (a) identify structural considerations (such as alternative timetables) and enhancements that can support students at risk; and

   (b) investigate barriers to offering remedial or gap-closing instruction during the school day.

10. THAT leaders for students at risk work with the Ministry of Education to identify and recommend resources that can support adolescent learning and assessment in literacy.

11. THAT leaders for students at risk work with the Ministry of Education to encourage and support large-scale research and pilot projects aimed at improving the literacy skills of students in Grades 7–12, by:

   (a) identifying areas where research is needed;

   (b) developing criteria for projects;

   (c) linking participating school boards with one another to encourage collegial dialogue.

12. THAT leaders for students at risk work with the Ministry of Education to support the development of literacy expertise in each board and every school with Grades 7–12, in order to:

   (a) create broad teacher understanding about adolescent literacy, cross-curricular literacy strategies, and appropriate supports for at-risk students;

   (b) develop a broad base of teachers who can model effective practices for developing the literacy skills of students in subjects across the curriculum; and

   (c) develop a broad base of teachers who can participate as members of school-based literacy teams.

Appendices

Suggested resources

Teachers, principals, vice-principals, and leaders for students at risk need practical information about literacy instruction and improvement planning. The school and board literacy plans should include a component for providing those resources.

The table on page 61 lists suggested resources. Boards are encouraged to maintain their own up-to-date list of suggested resources, and may want to use the following selection criteria as a guideline.

General criteria

For all three groups – teachers, principals/vice-principals, and leaders for students at risk – does the resource:

- focus on literacy initiatives, with an emphasis on reading and writing across content areas?
- support current research?
- include Canadian content?
- represent genders, cultures, races, faiths, family structures, and socio-economic levels?

Specific criteria

For **teachers**, does the resource:

- focus on classroom-ready materials that incorporate contemporary pedagogical knowledge and that outline research-based teaching and assessment strategies, with clear descriptions to help teachers implement the strategies?
- provide an overview of the reading and/or writing processes, and promote the important role of thinking skills in the related activities?
- help teachers to reflect on current teaching and assessment practices with adolescent learners at risk?

For **principals and vice-principals**, does the resource:

- focus on leadership (shared, distributed, establishing teacher learning teams, capacity building, designing professional development) and management (time, people, resources)?
- demonstrate ways to implement literacy initiatives; plan for improvement using relevant data; and promote home, school, and community partnerships?

For **leaders of students at risk**, does the resource:

- focus on comprehensive coverage of the literacy curriculum with in-depth information on effective reading and/or writing practices?
- provide information about assessment, including data interpretation and analysis and improvement plans for literacy and numeracy?
- present current research with references to related reading and professional resources?
- include content suitable for use in professional development?

Suggested resources to support literacy for students at risk in Grades 7 to 12

		Teachers	Principals & VPs	Leaders
Instruction	Even Hockey Players Read: Boys, Literacy and Learning (Canadian) David Booth. Pembroke Publishers 2002 ISBN 1-55138-147-8	–		–
	I Read It, But I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers Cris Tovani. Pembroke Publishers 2000 ISBN 1-57110-089-X	–		–
	I Think, Therefore I Learn (Canadian) Graham Foster, Evelyn Sawicki, Hyacinth Schaeffer, and Victor Zelinski. Pembroke Publishers 2002 ISBN 1-55138-148-6	–		–
	Info Tasks for Successful Learning (Canadian) Carol Koechlin and Sandi Zwaan. Pembroke Publishers 2001 ISBN 1-55138-133-8	–		
	Info-Kids: How to use non-fiction to turn reluctant readers into enthusiastic learners (Canadian) Ron Jobe and Mary Dayton-Sakari. Pembroke Publishers 2002 ISBN 1-55138-143-5	–		–
	On the Same Page: Shared Reading Beyond the Primary Grades Janet Allen. Pembroke Publishers 2002 ISBN 1-57110-332-5	–		
	Reaching Higher Resource Package and Video (Canadian) *[Contact the Ministry of Education for information.]*	–	–	–
	Reading Reasons: Motivational Mini-Lessons for Middle and High School Kelly Gallagher. Pembroke Publishers 2003 ISBN 1-57110-356-2	–		–
	Reading Strategies for the Content Areas Sue Beers and Lou Howell. ASCD Action Tool 2003 ISBN 0-87120-757-5	–		
	Teaching Reading in the Content Areas: If Not Me, Then Who? (Teacher's Manual, Second Ed.) Rachel Billmeyer and Mary Lee Barton. ASCD Publication 1998 ISBN 1-893476-05-7	–	–	–
	Think Literacy: Cross-Curricular Approaches, Grades 7–12 (Canadian) *[Contact the Ministry of Education for information.]*	–	–	–
	When Kids Can't Read, What Teachers Can Do: A Guide for Teachers 6–12 Kylene Beers. Heinemann 2003 ISBN 0-86709-519-9	–		
	Words, Words, Words: Teaching Vocabulary in Grades 4–12 Janet Allen. Pembroke Publishers 1999 ISBN 1-57110-085-7	–		
	Yellow Brick Roads: Shared and Guided Paths to Independent Reading 4–12 Janet Allen. Pembroke Publishers 2000 ISBN 1-57110-319-8	–		–
Leadership	Implementing a Reading Program in Secondary School (Video and Facilitator's Guide) ASCD Publication 2002 ISBN 0- 87120-621-8 (video), ISBN 0-87120-747-8 (guide)		–	
	Literacy Leadership for Grades 5–12 Rosemarye Taylor and Valerie Doyle Collins. ASCD Publication 2003 ISBN 0-87120-745-1		–	
	The Literacy Principal (Canadian) David Booth and Jennifer Rowswell. Pembroke Publishers 2002 ISBN 1-55138-146-X		–	
	Results: The Key to Continucus School Improvement Mike Schmoker. ASCD Publication 1996 ISBN 0-87120-260-3		–	–

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